

## RAILWAY: IDENTITY, DESIGN AND CULTURE

On a cold night in 1967, the westbound North Coast service calls in at Spokane Junction, Washington State. Air brakes exhale a sigh of relief as over 1,000 tonnes of train rolls to a stop at the marker point. Leading the consist of 14 cars is a F-9A diesel-electric locomotive, run by the Northern Pacific Railway Company. Two oblong windows, perched high up on the leviathan engine, vigilantly observe the track ahead; on either side of the centrally-mounted, button-nosed headlight, backlit registration numbers emit a diffuse, rosy hue; above the pilot cowl that hugs the track, several pneumatic pipes line up vertically to complete the moustachioed visage: the train has a face. The sum of its industrially-designed parts lends the train a personality and an authority that instill passenger confidence.

During the 'Golden Age' of steam, engineering dictated form and, by extension, aesthetics. The defining visual characteristics of the steam locomotive are a collective accident of design. From the buffers to the trailing tender, the elements of the driving force are all on view – the boiler, cylinders, coupling rods and driving wheels embody the architecture of the machine. Product design of the Industrial Revolution was executed by locomotive builders and engineers. Understandably, the elegance of innovation is not the first concern of the pioneering engineer; such considerations as performance and durability are far more important than the delicacies of style and 'good looks'. This is not to say that early steam engines are unattractive vehicles. Indeed, most have a well-proportioned majesty. Styling was dictated by weight, strength and engineering efficiency; iron plates, accented with rows of dome-headed rivets on the periphery, were an essential adornment. Decorative elements were limited to a filigreed crown on the smoke stack or a polished brass dome on the firebox; the beauty of Victorian engineering was its exoskeletal and random styling.

By the mid-nineteenth century, production of steam locomotives reached the hundreds, and advances in engineering brought about a metamorphosis in the appearance of engines. The inclined and vertical cylinders that had been a distinctive feature of early experimental models were now mounted horizontally and hidden from view next to the multi-tubular boiler. Single pairs of driving wheels were substituted with multiple, coupled pairs, with smaller carrying wheels to the front and rear. While Robert Stephenson & Company were still at the forefront of manufacturing output and ingenuity in England, an ardent competitive spirit was thriving. Engineering innovations, such as spring axles and fully water-jacketed firebox casings, together with the rearrangement of elements, created the shape of the new.

At the leading end of locomotive technology, engineers were improving steam pressure and tractive effort, while developing conjugated valve-gears. Engines built by Alco, Baldwin and Lima were powering America's railroads, which consisted of almost 161,000 kilometres (100,000 miles) of track at the beginning of the twentieth century. Worldwide, hundreds of railroad companies were enticing passengers with their, often luxurious, facilities and with the promise of faster schedules. Design, engineering and new materials converged with vigorous commercial enterprise to respond to the demands of flocking rail passengers, while, to some extent, creating those very demands.

(From the SERVICE chapter)

Mild anticipation greets me when I order food on a train. In an attempt to avoid disappointment, I assume a positive attitude by bringing to mind a quotation from Christopher Isherwood's novella *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. Mr Norris, contemplating a hock from the wine list, advises a fellow passenger, 'On a train one must always be prepared for the worst.'

Once upon a time in the UK, there was no such thing as The British Rail Sandwich. A heartening thought perhaps, although statistics reveal that, despite its poor reputation, the 'Traveller's Fare' item was surprisingly popular. Tens of millions of sandwiches were sold to meek rail travellers, who were resigned to the fact that, while satisfying their hunger, the snack did little to stimulate the palate. It was a sandwich of contradictions; it could be cold and soggy, or stale and hard, and the corners of the isosceles triangle-shaped bread would often curl up like the pages of a well-thumbed paperback. On display at the National Railway Museum in York, a document issued by the Director of British Rail Catering in 1971 gives precise instructions to food-preparation staff on how to make the sandwich. It was considered important that the consumer be able to see what lay between the two chalk-white slices of bread; at least a third of the

filling had to be placed in the centre, where the diagonal cut would be made. Portion control dictated exact weights: 21 grams ( $\frac{3}{4}$  ounce) of cheese and 7 grams ( $\frac{1}{4}$  ounce) of gherkin, 19 grams ( $\frac{2}{3}$  ounce) of luncheon meat and  $\frac{1}{12}$  punnet of cress, 19 grams ( $\frac{2}{3}$  ounce) of sardine and 9 grams ( $\frac{1}{3}$  ounce) of the infamous cause of the overall sodden result – sliced tomato. The British Rail Sandwich served its purpose and continues to lurk in the chiller cabinets of mediocre catering franchises, albeit packaged under different brand names. What the sales statistics do not indicate is that its popularity was probably due, in part, to the meagre choice of rail food in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Great Depression of the early 1930s in America, and, to a greater extent, the two World Wars, severely interrupted the growth of rail services on both sides of the Atlantic, which were either cut back to skeletal operations, commandeered for military use or, simply, ground to a halt. Particularly in Europe, recuperation was pedantic but, in time, economic stability returned, and despite competition from other transport sectors, post-war prosperity enabled a wider public to take to the rails. Life on board the train imitated street life; by the 1950s, rail catering companies had introduced disposable 'crocker'; and the paper plates and styrofoam cups of fast-food culture were here to stay. In Britain, trolleys that dispensed scaldingly hot tea and iced buns on the station platforms were slimmed down and adapted for use on board, selling branded chocolate bars and prepackaged food, covered in 'cellophane', or plastic wrap.

Tastes have changed over the years, and culinary globalization has contributed to the demand and supply of a more varied selection of food on trains and has given rise to some enticing multicultural hybrids. In the UK, Virgin Trains' Pendolino service currently offers an American-Chinese favourite, 'Chow Mein Noodles with Stir-Fry Vegetables', a Scottish-American 'Aberdeen Angus Cheeseburger', or a Lebanese-meets-New-York-deli composite of 'Grilled Asparagus and Chestnut Mushroom in Tomato Wrap'. This is all a far cry from the early years of the rail travel in Britain, before the advent of on-board catering, when the passenger either packed a picnic hamper or made use of the numerous station restaurants. Entrepreneurs were to recognize the rail passenger as a captive market, however, and began to supply prepared luncheon baskets. Principal stations offered a choice of hampers to suit individual pockets and, in one case, it seems, socio-political inclination – for 2 shillings and 6 pence, 'The Democratic' consisted of a pint bottle of ale, a couple of pieces of non-descript meat, or a meat pie, and bread and cheese. At twice the price, 'The Aristocratic' featured chicken, ham and tongue, cheese, bread, butter and a condiment, washed down with the choice of either a pint of claret or a half-pint of fortified wine.

The Victorians' attitude to eating in public was one of modesty, and most passengers preferred to retire to their own compartments to partake of their victuals. Initially, there had been a resistance to the concept of an on-board diner; the notion of an audience of the lower classes at the trackside or on the station platform witnessing the well-to-do relish a small banquet was considered vulgar. In addition, rail companies were loath to jeopardize the healthy patronage of the station restaurants and hotels under their management. It was only after the success of a multi-class diner, introduced by the Great Eastern Railway in 1891, that opinions changed. The diner comprised three carriages, which serviced the boat-train on the York-to-Harwich route. The oil-fired kitchen was situated in the middle car, with first- and second-class sections seating 18. The other two cars accommodated second- and third-class passengers in coach seats, the latter providing the country's first third-class dining compartment.